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## Developing Trust in Collaborative Research: Utilizing Indigenous Pacific Methodologies to create dialogue within research teams

Abstract: This article explores the processes involved in developing international, cross-cultural research teams. Scholarship on Indigenous and Pacific Methodologies demonstrate the importance of employing methodologies that center Indigenous approaches to research and relationships. This article explores using these methodologies within research teams as a preliminary step in developing sustainable and impactful international, cross-cultural research teams. Though this is not a formal study, the article reports on the importance of building trust within research teams is as essential as building trust with communities.

### What we already know:

- Public health research in/on the Pacific has traditionally been extractive
- This approach has tended to result in little meaningful benefit to local communities and has resulted in an understandable lack of trust towards international researchers
- Indigenous research methodologies can be a way of re-centering Indigenous knowledges, (re-)building trust and ensuring more ethical research engagements

### What this article adds:

- Highlights the importance of building trust within research teams as much as with communities
- Examines the benefits of Indigenous research methodologies not only for the research itself but within research collaborations
- Makes a case for “slow science” in cross-cultural research teams

## Introduction

The Pacific Islands have long been constructed as a space of “natural experimentation” in health research, which reflects a long history of extractive research practices<sup>1</sup> particularly in health research. To work against this history and create futures where research serves communities, scholars have developed Pacific Research Methodologies, including among many, Talanoa Research Methodology (TRM) and Kaupapa Māori Research<sup>2-7</sup>. These research methodologies create research as a practice of shared communication and co-construction of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

There is an emerging literature critically focused on how to create equitable, global health oriented, research teams<sup>9</sup>. We follow Tamasailau Suaali'i-Sauni and Saunima'a Ma Fulu-Aiolupotea<sup>10</sup> who argue that developing trust *within* research teams is essential to creating decolonizing research. This short report documents how two research teams employed TRM to facilitate trust building within research teams.

Methods: Our trust building exercises included sixteen researchers who comprise two distinct but overlapping research teams. Each researcher was connected through professional and personal networks prior to the talanoa sessions. They participated in several mediated talanoa sessions, each with a three-part purpose: (1) to develop trust within the research team; (2) to develop research capacity *for all participants* through participation in facilitated TRM sessions and (3) to define the health in regionally and culturally sensitive terms.

Series One: The first series, which included three formal sessions, was organized by anthropologists, Pacific health experts, and talanoa experts around a common interest in the role of trust in healthcare. [Author names] began with informal conversations with colleagues located in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, and New Zealand – based on already existing personal and professional relationships. They then gathered as a group for three talanoa sessions guided by Author. The session was guided by the following questions: what is trust? Can we think about trust in culturally specific and also culturally unifying ways? Would this be a meaningful construct for the communities we all work with? They also reflexively discussed what their roles, as the initial organizers, outsiders, and white anthropologists, should be in a talanoa session.

Series Two: National University of Samoa Nursing faculty, [Authors] began their collaboration with a series of zoom meetings with the aim of getting to know each other and the project proposed by Author. Author led the group through a series of three formal talanoa sessions focused on team-building communication practices, TRM itself and a deep discussion about the differences between Western/hegemonic research methodologies and Pacific methodologies. Acknowledging the differences within the groups, the two non-Samoan team members did not

participate in the first two talanoa sessions so the Samoan researchers could speak freely in Samoan but they did join for the final talanoa.

Results: The use of TRM in these team-building processes opened the space for storytelling between researchers allowing for unusual honesty in which collaborators could share harmful and hurtful past experiences within research teams and with foreign researchers. The talanoa sessions revealed three key aspects of (mis)trust in research teams.

First, collaborators highlighted the harmful assumptions often made about the role of local researchers in international teams. Participants said things like: “We are more than translators,” expressing a criticism of how their knowledge is treated as ancillary to the primary objectives of research. They also shared that foreign researchers often expect their partners in the Pacific Islands to be “grateful” for the opportunity to participate in research without compensation for their labor.

Secondly, when all members of the research team are not equally involved in the research design of the project, there are often cultural nuances and gender dynamics that are missed, which can lead to difficult situations for the researchers doing the actual data collection. Another said, “I’ve seen outside agencies get it wrong constantly...It’s very important that you get the questioning right. And I’ve seen it firsthand in my own village. You want to send us a loaded question, we’ll send you a loaded answer.”

Thirdly, another important topic of conversation was about research that was not returned to the community or not designed in a way that would be useful to the community. One participant said, “the research has to serve the community in some way, somehow. That has to be the main objective for your research – that it doesn’t just collect dust and it’s not to tick boxes, that it has real life.”

Discussion: The themes presented above demonstrate the importance of dialogue within diverse research teams. While addressing Pacific health inequities is a pressing issue, research that does not address long known shortcomings in Western research paradigms risk prolonging, or even exacerbating, those health inequalities. Through the process of talanoa - to talk openly without a specific goal - the participants were able to share their experiences doing research and through that dialogue develop values and strategies to guide future collaborative work that aims to repair those past wrongs. Through these dialogues, the team members began to orient to each other as co-researchers with distinct expertise. We have come to see that researchers must put themselves in the shoes of not only the people they seek to study but also their co-researchers.

There are, of course, limitations in this reporting. These teams are still in the process of working together so the long-term results of these efforts will need further investigation.

Conclusion: The main take-away from this process is that there is no singular solution to the problems of entrenched inequalities within research. Instead, we present our process as an example of restorative research practices designed not to build “local capacity” but to build equity and new kinds of capacity for *all researchers*. While power differences in international collaborative research can be problematic and antithetical to decolonizing efforts, the process described above was one effort to create terms of research engagement that were rooted in Pacific knowledges.

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